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Divergent Encounters with Normal: Are They Really So Different After All?

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Abstract

In this paper, I will draw on Fiona Kumari Campbell's theorizing of ableism to illustrate the essential role of theory in transformative reflection. Such critical reflection can change how we, as disabled students, understand daily experiences of marginalization, and can encourage reconsideration of our responses to them. By sharing how I came to make sense of my own lived experience at university, I hope to make a substantive contribution to academic conversations about the lived complexities of being disabled at university and about our responses to ableism in our midst. Moreover, I aim to add to current understandings of Campbell's theorizing by translating the often complex language of theory through the analysis and storying of lived experience.

Keywords

Normalcy; Ableism; Disability Studies Theory; Higher Education

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Introduction

As a disabled university student, encounters with 'normal', or the unquestioned and unexamined way that the world is put together (Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009), constitute a significant portion of my daily reality. The capacity that 'normal' has gained to shape higher education learning environments (Madriaga, Hanson, Kay, & Walker, 2011) has often materialized within ableist-imbued interactions that situate me as 'other' than 'normal'. Ableism is, as Fiona Kumari Campbell (2009; 2012) explains, an entrenched system of thinking that casts disability and/or impairment as inherently negative. It is a system whose logic relies on the notion of the normal individual and on an enforced division between the normal and the pathological. Those of us whose bodies and ways of doing fall outside normative parameters are often made 'other' by those who see us as objects of their own experience rather than subjects of experience with whom they might relate (Ware, 2005). Such objectification characterizes many of my marginalizing post-secondary experiences, yet critical reflection has allowed me to transform my understanding of two marginalizing encounters with professors that I have been struggling to make sense of for over twenty years.

Disability theory may not be the first place disabled students look to make sense of lived experience. Yet Campbell reminds us that theory, far from being abstract, can help us to make sense of lived experience, provide tools to help us sort out what is going on, and help us ask important questions about modern life (2012, p. 214). Nonetheless, it can be a formidable challenge to translate the often inaccessible language of disability theorizing into a meaningful

way of understanding experience, disrupting the conditions that perpetuate marginalization, and participating in important conversations about ourselves as disabled people (Grace, 2013).

Despite this challenge, I argue that robust engagement with theory can profoundly shape how we understand our lives as disabled university students. It can offer important frames for making sense of the multiple and often incongruous ways that our learning experiences situate us as 'other', and it can revitalize our strategies for working against the entrenched and often hidden manifestations of ableism that we experience and unknowingly internalize (Campbell, 2012).

In this paper, I aim to contribute to current scholarly discussions by sharing the important ways that my own engagement with Fiona Kumari Campbell's theorizing of ableism has profoundly transformed how I understand two particular encounters with 'normal' from my time at university in the early 1990s. By sharing both prior understanding and newly constructed meaning of these interactions through the analysis of lived experience, I also hope to provide an accessible entry point to the important work that Campbell is doing in order to focus our attention on the processes and practices of ableism. Tobin Siebers (2006) highlights our capacity to learn from lived experience because it is intimately connected to our social and political existence. Positioning my analysis within the lived experience of blindness on a university campus thus allows me to shed light on the workings of ableism in this particular context and on how student existence is inextricably bound up with those workings (O'Toole, 2013).

What follows is a discussion of my transformative engagement with theories of ableism that led me to reconsider the meaning I had made of what I now position as two divergent encounters with normal. Both occurred during my first six months of graduate study, but the contextual particulars were somewhat different. One took place in a classroom setting with a professor who was familiar with how I worked and had indicated interest in being

accommodating. The other occurred during an initial assessment with faculty who were largely unfamiliar with my way of doing and who may never have had, beyond this assessment, any occasion to navigate academic accommodation with me. These specific circumstances, along with the ableist thinking that I explore in this paper, contributed to constructing rather disparately lived experiences that through critical reflection, I have reframed as being similarly imbued with dominant ableist views on the place of disability in higher education. However, the most significant outcome of this analysis was that it led to an understanding of the realities of internalization and to a gradual but certain claiming of voice that allowed me to tell a story that I had long been struggling to frame and articulate.

Encounters with Normal - Take One

For many years, I have found myself thinking back on two sets of circumstances from my graduate studies in the early 1990s. Two very different interactions with professors prompted a range of emotional responses that included mild amusement, self-satisfaction, frustration, anger, outrage, and a sense of helplessness in the face of being unable to change the perspective of another. I had been dealt a swift and public classroom blow in which an instructor had told me my disabled way of doing was not welcome, a declaration that arrived on the heels of a more drawn out exchange that had troubled my disabled way of doing as unfair to me. My responses, in turn, felt equally different – different in the amount of energy they consumed and with respect to the result they produced.

I Won't Allow You to Impose...

In the fall of 1992, I was in the first year of a Master's Degree in Music Therapy in a mid-sized private university in the South Western United States. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) had just been enacted, and my entrance interviews with faculty pointed to a promising setting for the pursuit of studies as a blind student. First semester courses progressed smoothly, and my participation in learning activities had been facilitated with ease.

However, during a second semester course for both graduate and undergraduate students, I collided with 'normal' in a particularly difficult way. Several students were finding the workload stressful, and their expression of difficulty led to a facilitated class negotiation about course requirements and schedule. Someone suggested that we determine schedule and content at the beginning of each week, an approach with a reasonable rationale on the surface. However, my need for more time to access tape-recorded readings made it impractical. I voiced my perspective and was greeted with a public pronouncement that I would not be permitted to impose my disability on my class.

In the midst of the most adverse encounter with 'normal' I could recall, I found myself uncharacteristically lost for either words or action. I was advised by others to keep silent and carry on, a strategy that left me assuming the burden of securing timely access to course materials. A follow-up discussion with the course instructor yielded nothing more than an assertion that one day, I would thank him, a response that effectively silenced further discussion.

This Can't Be Fair!

Six months before the previously discussed encounter, I completed a theory placement test that assessed my level of competence in analyzing music from genres that spanned more than three

hundred years. It was a highly visual task, so I negotiated an alternate mode of assessment with the faculty members involved. The professor overseeing this process was more than accommodating, and we devised one process for the Classical selection and another for the twentieth century requirements. Importantly, both solutions were entirely based on my knowledge of how I could most effectively demonstrate competence in these areas.

The assessment of the Classical excerpt proceeded without incident, but the twentieth century formal analysis caused great consternation for both participating instructors. We had agreed that two professors would participate in the exam - one would be at the piano with me and the other would record my responses. A sighted analysis is customary and involves looking at musical excerpts and labelling clusters and sequences of notes. However, analysis for me involves listening to musical elements as played on the piano and identifying them orally. Thus, for sighted musicians, aural analysis is frequently outside the realm of their experience and often perceived as inordinately difficult.

We were not far into the examination before one professor interjected and expressed his discomfort with a process that he felt couldn't possibly be fair to me. I assured him it was, and the assessment continued. At multiple points, the same concern was raised out of genuine care for the equity of the process. I continued to state, with increasing emphasis, that this was the way I always worked. My high score on the entrance exam was a clear indication that his growing discomfort could not have been based on poor performance because of an inequitable test situation. I finally had to assure him that putting a score in front of me and expecting me to analyze it visually would be unfair, but allowing me to do it aurally was simply allowing me to complete the task in the way I had always done it. Both professors understood, but were clearly uncomfortable with the difficulty of the task.

Framing Ableism to Reframe my Story

Before I begin to unpack the meaning I have made of my encounters with 'normal', I want to attend to a framing of ableism that I argue brings focus to compulsory ability, a preference for its normative expression, and the internalization of those beliefs as a powerful mechanism for maintaining them. Ableism is, as my experience has taught me, so insidiously entrenched in our everyday existence that we are largely unaware of its force in our lives. We breathe its logic, are shaped by its politics, and are unknowingly complicit in nurturing its power (Campbell, 2008, 2009; 2012). Ableism refers to, "A network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human." (Campbell, 2001, p. 44). It situates disability as the quintessential Other of a neoliberal ableist society that values the independent, able-bodied, and autonomous citizen (Goodley, 2014).

Campbell acknowledges there is little agreement about what specific practices constitute ableism, but an ableist view generally holds disability to be unacceptable. A system of ableism depends on an enforced division between the normal and the abnormal (ability and disability), but each side of this binary relies inevitably on the other for its meaning and existence (Campbell, 2012). Any discussion of disability thus necessitates immediate scrutiny of ability, a phenomenon that has become individualized, antisocial, and idealized in modern society (Goodley, 2014).

While ability and disability work to sustain one another, a clear distinction is maintained through the assignment of discrete meanings to each. Ability is good and empowering, but disability is bad, disabling, and clearly unwanted (Titchkosky, 2007). In a way, we can think of

ability as a destiny, one that we usually associate with success and with the elusive norm to which ableist thinking has us all aspiring (Campbell, 2009; Goodley, 2014). Ability is, Goodley explains, a linear, certain, and expectant conception that undergirds many of our beliefs around what it means to be a valued human being (p. 41).

This frame of thinking makes visible the societal circumstances under which individuals and groups can and do establish their preference for certain abilities (Wolbring, 2008).

Moreover, it is reflective of the unquestioned trust we have placed in the notions that disability and ability are readily distinguishable and that they are located solely within individual people (Titchkosky, 2007). This individualization, Titchkosky reminds us, is an essential mechanism in the maintenance of the ability/disability binary. It also forces us, as disabled people, to develop relations in the here and now to each side of that binary (Titchkosky, 2007, pp. 3143-3144).

These relations, I argue, are inevitably shaped by our particular circumstances and often develop as we work to secure our place in environments that privilege able-bodied ways of being and doing. For me, those relations were shaped by the realities of my post-secondary encounters, and they signified deep internalization of ableist values. Disability is an undesirable imposition on normal routines of teaching and learning, and normatively expressed ability is necessary for one to become a valued student. Thus, internalization emerged for me as a most powerful mechanism in the production and maintenance of ableism, a realization that led me to Campbell's work as a way of making sense of post-secondary marginalization and of my role in supporting the conditions that produce it.

In *Exploring Internalized Ableism Using Critical Race Theory*, Fiona Kumari Campbell (2008) draws on insights from Critical Race Theory to help us think through the processes, formation, and consequences of ableism. Her interest in how complicity is made real in and

through internalized ableism affords an understanding of how strategies intended to subvert the power of ableism often end up reinforcing the values that sustain it. Internalization materialized for me through strategic expressions of ability, or what I sometimes refer to as performing normal, in order to present myself as able and thus deserving of a place in contemporary spaces of higher learning. Yet Campbell's theorizing highlights that such strategies only serve to reinforce academic commitments to normatively expressed ability with minimal disruption to routines of teaching and learning as a requirement for membership in such communities.

Unpacking My Story: Why Should I Tell It?

In the first six months of my Master's Degree, I had encountered 'normal' in both deeply discriminatory and strangely satisfying ways. I had been told my disabled way of doing was unwelcome by one who did not want to be challenged and unsettling by others who were focused on fairness. Although disparately lived, each encounter set me apart from my peers and left me struggling to make sense of an indefinable connection. While initially perplexed about the nature of this link, the realization that there was one afforded some clarity around the extreme uncertainty that I often experienced while working with professors to arrange accommodations. Such uncertainty stemmed from the realities of meeting with varying levels of faculty support for accommodations, and from having to negotiate within the deficit-based disability discourses that pervade the university milieu (Hibbs & Pothier, 2006; Magnus & Tøssebro, 2013; Mullins & Preyde, 2013). As I endeavoured to learn amidst such uncertainty, I slowly, although unknowingly, cultivated a coping strategy that simultaneously supported and resisted the discourses that were shaping my self-understanding in the post-secondary milieu. I learned to

remain silent in the most difficult encounters, but I used ability to push back against that unspeakable discrimination to secure my place at university.

My particular story of higher learning was one I had been encouraged to tell to contribute to the work of establishing lived experience as a legitimate form of knowledge. It ultimately stemmed, however, from the meaning I had made of previously lived experience, knowledge that had been shaped by theoretically-mediated perspectives on disability's place in the world (Mohanty, 2000). The knowledge I had constructed about my identity as a post-secondary learner had emanated from the narratives that ableism creates about who we are and who we should be – independent, autonomous, and able-bodied citizens (Campbell, 2009; Goodley, 2014). However, that ableist view was now being challenged by my engagement with theorizing that made real the possibility of transforming meaning by exposing the ableist beliefs that had influenced my prior understanding (Wilkerson, 2000). Thus, telling my story became a way to shape a new narrative, one that I can claim as authentically mine, and through its telling, call attention to ableism as a means of negotiating greater access and inclusion in higher education (Kerschbaum, 2013).

I agree that we can't possibly predict the myriad orientations that future readers will bring to their reading of our texts, but Kerschbaum reminds us that choosing how we will shape our stories of disability and ableism in our academic writing is still a deeply agentic act. Engaging with ableism to transform prior meaning has offered an opportunity to disentangle my story from the one spun by a traditional canon that situates disability as deficit, frames student experience within narratives of overcoming, and ensures that disabled university students will continually encounter extra layers of struggle and resolution (Hayman, 2010; Linton, 1998). Moreover, new ways of thinking about past experience offer new possibilities for future action, making real the

possibility of moving away from strategies that force our silence and consolidate ability, normatively expressed, as a marker of belonging.

Unsettling Reflections, Unearthing Internalization

Emboldened by a new theoretical frame, I took up the unsettling process of revisiting encounters with 'normal' that I thought I had already sorted. For many years, I saw the first as just one more discriminatory event to add to the pile, a case of being disabled by unjust or uncaring institutions or people (Barnes, 2012). The theory exam, on the other hand, was a largely insignificant example of people not understanding how I work. Moreover, it was rather satisfying to complete work with relative ease that my professors believe to be inordinately difficult. However, threads of a new perspective began slowly to emerge through critical reflection that revealed how ableism had shaped my thinking.

Understanding ableism as a deeply oppressive force did not, I acknowledge, prepare me for the intensity one can experience during critically reflective processes. Neither did it equip me for the discomfort I would feel on discovering that internalization is one of ableism's most powerful productive and reproductive mechanisms. Indeed, I remember vividly the crushing blow that ableism delivered as my thinking exposed the extent to which I had internalized ableist values. I had fully assimilated the belief that demonstrating ability was the only way to succeed. So I had frequently taken advantage of, and even sought out, opportunities to express my abilities to succeed in a non-disabled world. For me, these were repeated acts of resistance that allowed me to emulate 'normal' with increasing success and to secure a place among the ranks of the able disabled (Titchkosky, 2007). Contrasting with my intent is the reality that this strategy helped to consolidate the hegemonic status of ability preference that sustains ableist networks of

belief (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012), and it lent increasing legitimacy to the conviction that a disabled life was not what anyone would want to live.

Troubling though it was, unearthing internalization had opened the door to understanding the realities of ableism's force in my life, and to a nuanced theoretical exploration that promised to confirm some of my previous thinking while fundamentally challenging how I would understand its consequences. For instance, the more distressing classroom interaction had most certainly been validated as an example of the discrimination and oppression that disabled people experience (Hehir, 2002). However, interpreting the less injurious and admittedly more flattering encounter during the theory exam as somewhat annoying yet largely insignificant seemed increasingly less useful. These particular revelations did not create an obvious path forward, but my insights cleared the way for leaving behind emotionally charged exchanges in which I asserted the violation of my access rights and actively sought the assignment and acceptance of blame.

Exploring Ableism's Explanatory Potential

The decision to revisit my encounters with normal was prompted by insights that emerged within my doctoral supervisory relationship. New ways of engaging with such marginalizing experiences were in order because the old ways had me mired in my own 'othering' perspectives. I had set my sights on exposing the discriminatory actions of specific people or groups of people because of the lasting harm those relations had caused. Unfortunately, this approach was not creating fertile ground on which productive conversations among willing participants could work to open up the structural forces that perpetuate such thinking and action (St. Pierre, 2011). So not only was I seeking a frame that might cast twenty year old experiences in a new light, but I was

looking for an analysis that would inform and empower future action in similar circumstances. If ableism's real problem, as Dan Goodley (2014) suggests, arises when we stop discussing and debating it, I was going to have to find a way to advance those conversations. This meant gaining a deeper understanding of how theoretical perspectives might build confidence in beginning and growing them.

In an academic context, I have often found myself trapped in those conversations that seek to define my abilities as they relate and compare to those of my peers. They are familiar conversations in which ability is afforded the kind of privilege that makes both its presence and its normative expression preferred or required. Hence, solidifying a sense of belonging becomes substantively linked to the abilities that others perceive I possess, and consideration is given to the extent to which demonstrating those abilities will disrupt traditional approaches to teaching and learning. Transcending the temptation to simply identify the discriminatory (ableist) practices and behaviours that such conversations embody is a challenge that must be taken up if I am to expand their scope. It is critical, I have found, to understand how such interactions are more intricately situated within ableism's complex and embedded network of beliefs. As previously stated, ableism produces a species-typical, and therefore fully human, body to which we are all expected to aspire. Disability is therefore perceived to be provisional and unacceptable, and it is subject to erasure when a solution comes along (Campbell, 2009).

This perfectible body that Campbell points out is an unattainable goal with no fixed reality is clearly absurd. Yet I easily comprehend how it has entrenched itself in our thinking and how, in spite of such absurdity, I have been drawn in to such normalizing thoughts. Ableism has incited a host of responses to disability that see us, as disabled people, continually ranked

according to our level of mastery over our bodies and being assimilated by constant encouragement to strive for normal.

As I explored Campbell's writing, my understanding of her theorizing was strengthening, but my confidence in its utility was not. It did after all seem to present a rather dismal reality with respect to my position as a disabled woman and the potential for me to move out of the subordinate status to which I had been assigned. The perfectible, or species-typical body, was completely out of reach because there was no possibility that my sight would be restored. I would continue to rely on the compensatory supports of an ableist society (Campbell, 2008) in order to participate and succeed in higher learning. Finally, I would continue to demonstrate ability in a way that while sometimes seen as exemplary, is nonetheless judged to be 'other' to the norm. In the midst of this uncertainty however, I found I was being challenged by Campbell's compelling claim that emulating normal was an inadequate strategy for disrupting ableism (Campbell, 2012), and I found myself rethinking my encounters through a new lens.

Encounters with Normal - Take Two

My engagement with ableism as a conceptual tool has led to a profound reconsideration of my encounters with normal of twenty years past, and of multiple encounters that have transpired since. It has allowed me to bring seemingly disparate academic interactions into dialogue through a lens that has exposed my complicity in the ableist project that maintains the compulsory status of ability (Campbell, 2009). Learning to think differently about academic relationships that had foreclosed the possibility of living a disabled subjectivity (Butler, 1999) has undoubtedly been some of the hardest work I have ever done (St. Pierre, 2000). It has, however, presented an opportunity to take up the daunting, yet important challenge to examine

how my complicity has lent unintended support to societal convictions that it only makes sense to see a disabled way of being and doing in terms of limit without possibility (Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009). For one who has lived a life marked by marginalization and discrimination, the thought of complicity seemed counter-intuitive - an outright betrayal of a grass-roots movement that has worked tirelessly for the recognition of disabled people as an oppressed group. As I grappled with this conundrum, thoughtful exploration of the realities of internalization proved profoundly liberating because it exposed the insight that I can be 'other' than complicit, a particular 'other' I am willing to embrace.

The daily realities of internalization are difficult to explain because I have, for much of my life, been unaware of its power to shape my thinking and action. As I moved through public and post-secondary schooling, the extent to which I embraced normalcy as my ideal strengthened. I learned that if I did 'normal' work in what resembled the 'normal' way, I would be rewarded for my achievement and for the courage and determination with which I was overcoming blindness. This kind of recognition sparked an internal drive to achieve, and to do so with as little help as possible. It was a direct link for me – the more I did independently, the more I received praise. The ultimate compliment was when people said, "You are so capable, I sometimes forget you are blind"! As a blind adolescent, natural musical ability that often surpassed that of my peers became the ground on which my thinking about the importance of normalcy was solidified. The growth of my talent led to accolades from peers and mentors alike, and I began to see musicianship as the path to a life that would see blindness overpowered by normalcy. After all, blindness did not have anything to do with who I was; it was simply an inconvenient sensory fact that was not going to obstruct my success.

In the context of my two encounters with normal, I have uncovered mechanisms of complicity that materialize as both passive and active, and that help to explain a rather complicated and ambivalent relationship with normal. Passive complicity emerged in the form of silence that sustained ability as obligatory and upheld the prerequisite that disability would not disturb the regular flow of teaching and learning. At the time, I saw silence as the only way to cope with unspeakable marginalization because it protected me from further injurious utterances, and it allowed me to get on with the business of learning. Furthermore, it was a form of resistance to the public assertion that I didn't belong - my way of proving that I could succeed in spite of the barrier that had been so blatantly placed before me.

"Disability doesn't belong here", I was told. "I won't let you impose your disabled way of being on us", he declared. "I'll show you", my silence replied. "I'll show you ability, and I don't need your help to do it"! My decision to remain silent did protect me in the short term. Unfortunately, it worked powerfully to uphold ability as preferable and to consolidate the undesirable status of disabled ways of being and doing. Moreover, it made real for many, including me, the legitimacy of my story as one of overcoming - triumph in the face of adversity.

The undesirability of my way of being a university student was further entrenched as a result of my unsuccessful attempts to reach resolution. Not only was my way of learning held up as an imposition on normal, but my inability to recognize it as such was exposed for me as unfortunate - a situation that I would one day thank my professor for making evident. This interaction itself did not directly enlist my complicity, but it drove me into further complicit silence and reinforced an unspoken need to find other ways of speaking back.

How does one speak back beyond asserting rights to accommodation that can be so easily dismissed and so publically refused? This is, at least in my story, where the flattering events

come into play. The most obvious way to speak back in such cases was to draw on ability and highlight those parts of myself that could approximate normal. Yet just as my silence represented passive complicity co-opted by an inflexible, unyielding, and inaccessible environment (Baglieri & Knopf, 2004), my slowly cultivated active strategy of drawing on ability made me similarly, yet more actively, complicit.

"This can't be fair", they said with concern. "It is perfectly fair", I assured them. "This seems too much to expect", they repeated. "This is the easiest way for me to do this, it is just the way I work", I replied. Once again, although in a more positive way, my disabled way of doing was firmly positioned as 'other'. The ordinary was transformed into the extraordinary simply because it was outside their realm of experience. The fact that I could complete a contemporary theoretical analysis completely by ear was seen as extraordinary, and in that one encounter I became not only 'other' to normal, but 'other' to disabled. This accommodation was in no way a compensatory approach to analysis in their view, it was actually deemed more difficult than anything they would ask of a student, able-bodied or not. Thus, my extraordinary demonstration of analytic ability positioned me as able disabled, a ranking that confounds the able/disabled binary and makes its own significant contribution to 'othering' (Titchkosky, 2007).

By displaying this ability that they saw as so extraordinary, I had once more inadvertently contributed to the entrenchment of ability as compulsory. Ability is what we need to "make it" in a normative environment, and being able to demonstrate it in such a rigorous way was what made that environment hospitable to a disabled way of doing.

The realization that even these positive encounters with 'normal' had contributed to consolidating the place of ability as a necessary part of being a competent student has been most helpful in developing a nuanced understanding of how ableism is produced and maintained.

However, the most powerful insight I have gained through this analytic lens is how these two kinds of encounters have converged and led me to take up a strategy of emulating normal to actively manage the perceptions of others (Campbell, 2009; Olney & Brockelman, 2003). This repeated convergence of qualitatively different experiences gradually transformed unconscious complicity into conscious strategy in order to prove that I belonged in mainstream spaces of teaching and learning. Largely influenced by my musical background, I have come to describe this strategy as a performance of 'normal'. It is a characterization of a nuanced and evolving process that allows for the intentionality of strategic perception management and the more deeply entrenched compulsion to emulate normal that is largely hidden from conscious awareness.

Concluding Thoughts

Telling our stories of marginalization in higher learning helps us to develop a rich understanding of how we live with ableism in this particular context. It also prompts us to think deeply about how to work against the influence that ableism has on the people and programs that support our learning. It is equally important, yet less frequently done, to share the process by which we have come to make sense of our marginalizing experiences and responses within them. Theory, as I have tried to demonstrate, is indeed a powerful and under-utilized tool that we can draw upon as we work to make sense of the intensely complicated ways we are forced to engage with 'normal' in our daily lives. 'Normal' is an idealized but nonexistent category that nevertheless remains fixed and unquestioned in its influence over how disability in higher learning is framed. In our incessant search for effective strategies to counter this dominance, a thorough understanding of

the ableist thinking that shapes our post-secondary experiences supported by a robust theoretical foundation is an important strategy to consider.

When I began doctoral study, my exposure to theories of disability that aimed to trouble disability as deficit and to expose how ableism is sustained had been minimal. My activist work was rooted in the social model and was most often focused on highlighting and removing social barriers to inclusion. Rarely, if ever, was I involved in discussions about how my 'activist' responses might actually be working to consolidate rather than disrupt the power that normal had acquired and exerted in my life. In fact, I do not recall even one conversation in which the term ableism even entered the discussion. I had always understood, largely through lived experience, that my position at university was one of marginalization; but I had only been able to make sense of that marginalization within binary or hierarchical terms that left me feeling powerless to create change.

My previous activist efforts had revolved primarily around systemic disability action aimed at affecting program and policy changes that would have a positive and lasting effect on the accessibility of my province. I drew frequently on the social model of disability to illustrate to government officials the necessity for change, arguments that could have been strengthened by engaging deeply with theories of disability that would help me to develop an understanding of what ableism entails and how it is sustained through everyday action. As a disabled scholar, I feel strongly that my lived experiences of marginalization in higher education oblige me to explore, understand, and articulate the presence, and sometimes harsh consequences, of ableism in that context (Campbell, 2008). The first step for me in taking up this sometimes formidable challenge has been to unravel, as Campbell describes it, the psychic life of internalized ableism. This unraveling has exposed for me the complexities of my life-long encounters with 'normal' –

encounters that have compelled me to internalize the network of beliefs that have erected a seemingly impervious divide that values, above all else, able-bodied ways of being and doing. While I do not wish to assign hierarchical value to the various states of injury that can and do emerge from living daily with ableism, I consider it imperative to acknowledge the powerful wound that is sustained and that festers when your complicity has been conscripted to solidify your identity as 'other' in a learning environment. It was an uncomfortable realization to be certain, but it revealed the immediate possibility of becoming 'other' than complicit and living a life that is 'other' to one that unconsciously embodies ableist ideals.

For Campbell (2012), the possibility of disrupting the hold that internalized ableism has on disabled people can be made real when we turn our backs on emulating normal as a strategy for success. She suggests, for example, that we begin framing our stories in ways that embrace impairment and frame success in terms of 'because disability' to counter the popular stories of liberalism that frame success as 'in spite of disability'. This was, without doubt, an arduous yet worthwhile challenge for one who now understands that her story had long been held in the grip of an ontological viewpoint that finds it difficult, if not impossible, to imagine a life where we can speak of success, and indeed happiness, 'because disability'.

This in-depth excavation of my post-secondary encounters with 'normal' has led to some uncomfortable discoveries. However, it represents a life-changing engagement with theoretical writings on ableism that have allowed me to transform those feelings of discomfort into a richly informed way of being that I hope can make a substantive contribution to the disruption of ableism as a prevailing force in post-secondary education. With Campbell's robust theoretical explorations, I have begun to negotiate the prickly territory of complicity and grapple with the realization that the insidious fixity of ability equated to normalcy had significantly injured my

sense of self - injury that had been made possible in and through the multiple ways that I had internalized ableist ideals. Yet I can't stress enough the transformation that is possible when we live through, rather than resist, the truly uncomfortable space that theory can compel us to enter. It is here that we empower ourselves to be agents of change; and it is here that we can begin to entrench ways of thinking that are 'other' to ableist.

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